AN INTERVIEW WITH HERMAN STRECKER IN 1887

On October 25, 1942, the late Rudolf Hommel of Richlandtown, Pa., Oriental scholar, one time curator of the Historical Society of Montgomery County (Pa.) and author of the classic "China at Work," published in 1937 for The Bucks County Historical Society (Pa.), advised me in a letter about an account of Herman Strecker that had appeared in the Pennsylvania School Journal (Lancaster, Pa.) volume 36, pp. 257–261, January, 1888, and which had been reprinted from the New York Evening Sun. At the time the significance of the account escaped me and I had no easy way of determining whether or not it had been noticed in an entomological journal. When Mathilde M. Carpenter's excellent "Bibliography of Biographies of Entomologists" was published in 1945, I noted that the "Pennsylvania School Journal" reference was not included among those referring to Herman Strecker. Again I did nothing, being occupied with other matters. Recently however I came across Mr. Hommel's letter and decided that the 1887 account of Mr. Strecker might be worth looking into. Through the courtesy of Herbert B. Anstaett, librarian of Franklin and Marshall College I obtained a photostatic copy of the account which I think is worth preserving in an entomological journal, thereby making it more accessible to future historians of entomology.

Ferdinand Heinrich Herman Strecker, 1836–1901, was an architect, designer, sculptor and traveler, a student and collector of butterflies from all over the world, whose best known work "Lepidoptera, Rhopaloceres and Heteroceres, Indigenous and Exotic, with Descriptions and Colored Illustrations" is familiar to all lepidopterists. This was commenced in 1872 and was published and illustrated by the author. Between 1872 and 1878 fifteen parts were published. Three supplementary parts appeared in 1898, 1899 and 1900 and on April 21, 1900 a single sheet was published. In Catalogue 37 of Edward Morrill & Son, Inc., Cambridge, Mass., November, 1953, this work dated (1879) is listed for sale at $45.00, and an appended note states "Second edition. Inserted is a 22-page pamphlet by the author,

Harrisburg, 1879, 'Butterflies and Moths in Their Connection with Agriculture and Horticulture'." Franklin and Marshall conferred upon him the degree Doctor of Philosophy and in 1908, seven years after his death, his extensive collection of Lepidoptera was purchased by the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. The interview by the unknown reporter of the "New York Sun" follows.—H. B. Weiss.

HERMAN STRECKER

A Visit to America's Most Famous and Learned Collector of Butterflies

Not long ago there passed through New York post office a package wrapped in brown canvas and covered with red seals and directions in a foreign language. The red seals bore the imperial arms of Russia, and the directions announced that the package was from the Grand Duke Nicholas of Russia, and that it was going to Herman Strecker, of Reading, Pa. It contained butterflies, of which the Duke is an enthusiastic collector, and about which he has written a book, a copy of which, with his autograph in an angular, delicate hand, also found its way to Mr. Strecker. The butterflies and book were a tribute from a royal personage to a man who works as a designer and stonecutter in a marble yard during the day, but who is the greatest collector of and writer about butterflies on this continent, and who is known to every collector in his line in the world.

Last week an "Evening Sun" reporter journeyed to Reading to visit Mr. Strecker and see the largest collection of butterflies in America. He found him in his studio on the upper floor of a marble-cutter's shop, drawing a design for a monument. He is a man of about 50 years old, of medium build, with silvered beard, a face denoting perfect health and good nature, a pleasant voice and gentle eyes. He talks in a pleasant, off-hand manner, and will converse hours with you about butterflies and never use a scientific term unless you too are a collector. He rather reluctantly promised to let his guest see his butterflies after working hours in the evening, and then left his drawing board to go down and carve away at a unique monument in the marble yard.

All about the place were specimens of his handiwork. One tombstone was in the form of a stump, with its roots entwining a rock and ferns springing about its base. With the true instinct of a lover of nature, the sculptor has ornamented his monuments with examples of plant growth and the like rather than with the impossible lambs and angels that certain marble-cutters give to the world as a means of adding terror to death and dissolution.

While awaiting the hour set for the visit to the naturalist's collection, the visitor wandered out to a beautiful cemetery near Reading. A large figure of Christ upon the cross was one of the most striking monuments there. The look and attitude of the figure of the Redeemer expressed agony more completely than almost any design of a similar subject extant. It was apparent that the sculptor possessed a remarkably accurate knowledge of anatomy. The design was made and the figure carved by this self-same modest Mr. Strecker. A large monument to the soldier dead in the same cemetery was his work, and a bas relief in marble of Poe's Raven, which is owned by Joseph Drexel, in this city, is another evidence of his genius.

The visitor's guide consented to tell him about the modest sculptor and naturalist. Many years ago there came to Reading from Philadelphia a lad who attended school there two years, adding to the fund of learning that he had acquired in Philadelphia. When he was still a mere boy he left school and went to work as a marble-cutter. That finished his studies under teachers, but not his acquirement of knowledge. One of his ancestors had been a sculptor, and from him he inherited his taste for art. On his mother's side were three naturalists—Benjamin, Richard and Edward Kern. There was a doleful similarity in their taking off, Benjamin having been slain by the Indians while a member of the Fremont expedition, Richard having perished while on the Gunnison expedition, and Edward meeting his death from exposure while with Perry's party. From this strain of relationship the boy inherited his desire to be a naturalist. He lacked the time and the means, however, to humor his taste to the desired extent. He had to work at marble-cutting ten hours a day. He devoted holidays to collecting insects, and his nights to mounting them and to study.

He made a curious collection of tarantulas from all parts of the world where they flourish and bite, the largest being a great brown fellow from Costa Rica, and the most forbidding in appearance a big gray one from Texas. Gradually he drifted from bugs to butterflies and moths, and for over forty years he has been studying them.

There was something almost pathetic in the naturalist's struggles to publish his first book. Of course it was about butterflies. A work on that subject is expensive, for it must be illustrated with colored plates. Mr. Strecker saved enough money to buy a lithographic stone, and then drew and engraved upon it the group of butterflies to appear on the first page of illustrations. He sent the stone to Philadelphia, and expended his last spare dollar in having 300 plates printed from it. Then the stone was returned, and he cleaned it and drew upon it another group of butterflies. By the time the work was completed, he had hoarded enough money to pay for the printing of 300 impressions from the stone. Thus the stone traveled back and forth between Reading and Philadelphia until the plates were all finished. Then the text was printed and the book issued. The 300 copies were soon sold, but the demand for the work increased. Alas, the poor artist had destroyed his lithographic work necessary for the illustrations, and he could not meet the demand. The book is, of course, now out of print, and worth a fabulous sum.

As the subject of butterflies grew upon the collector, he concluded to prepare a work on American butterflies and moths, giving lists of every work in which they are mentioned, a brief review of the author or collector, and other information invaluable to a naturalist. It was necessary to consult every book written on the subject. The naturalist had his own library, but it did not contain all the desired books of reference. He was compelled to visit the libraries of New York, leaving Reading after he had ceased work Saturday, and returning in time to resume his stone-cutting Monday morning. He spent Sundays in his researches here, and most of Saturday and Sunday nights traveling to and from the metropolis. He found when he had exhausted his sources of information, that there were still two

books to be consulted that were not in this country, and he had to employ agents abroad to search them for him. When their task had been concluded, Mr. Strecker published his work, which is one of the most exhaustive in its province ever issued. One paragraph in the portion that deals with the personnel of butterfly collectors tells in terse form a story of devotion to science that happily finds no counterpart in Mr. Strecker's case. It makes allusion to the collection of Dru Drury, a goldsmith of London, who made an extensive collection and then became so impoverished by reason of his expenditures on his work, that he had to part with his specimens. Mr. Strecker's latter work proved profitable, and repaid him in a monetary sense for its preparation.

At 5:30 o'clock the visitor walked out to a fine brick house on Chestnut Street, almost at the base of one of the mountains of the blue range that flanks Reading, and waited for the coming of its master, the naturalist. A curious grotesque figure from China, carved from a great root and representing a terribly impossible animal with other smaller and more horrible animals crawling over it, stands in the hall of the savant's handsome residence. On the walls of the parlor is a wonderfully intricate drawing of a religious nature from Mr. Strecker's pen and pencil, as fine in handling as the line-work on a bank note, and a painting made from one of his own sketches of a forest scene in Central America, where he went some years ago in search of specimens for his collection.

Finally the butterfly man, as his neighbors call him, arrived and conducted his visitor to an upper story of his house, where his beloved treasures are stored. It is a big room full of what looked like wardrobes, with cases of books on one side, and pigeonholes full of letters, carefully classified, on another. These letters are from men in all parts of the world, who are eminent in Mr. Strecker's domain of research, and who in their line are greater than Daniel Webster was in his, among them being Prof. Westwood of the University of Oxford, Dr. Herman Burmeister (now in Buenos Ayres), Dr. Otto Standinger of Dresden, and Dr. Felder, Lord Mayor of Vienna, who has almost as many titles as butterfly specimens. A long, white table, with two gas-

burners on it, extends the length of the room. The naturalist has done all his work in arranging his specimens and making his drawings at night, after the completion of his day's work, and he still treasures the old burner by the light of which he made his lithographic drawings for his first book. When he had lighted his room, he sat down and asked: "Well, what do you want to know?"

"All about your collection," answered the visitor.

The Doctor of Philosophy, for at least one college has honored him with that title, looked surprised and said: "What, tell you in one evening about a collection that I have been forty years in getting together!" As he spoke, he opened with loving care a box that had just arrived from New Zealand. It was full of butterflies, each done up in a paper folded in a three-cornered envelope. He took the specimens out and laid them in a jar half full of moist sand. After they have remained there long enough to become thoroughly pliable, he places them on a block with a groove in the middle for the accommodation of the bodies. The wings are spread and then fastened down beneath pieces of pasteboard. Thus they are left until they become rigid, and are then mounted in the drawers of the cabinet by thrusting long, slender pins through them. Other boxes full of butterflies had been put up for shipment to distant quarters of the earth, in exchange for specimens that had been received from them. These boxes had little glass windows in the top, to enable the Custom House officers to examine the contents without opening them. The skull of an ancient Peruvian, with a bit of black drapery over it, gave a weird effect to the surroundings, and in a room up stairs the buckskin garments once worn by the Indian chief Red Jacket hung over a model.

"What is the most expensive butterfly in your collection?" asked the visitor.

The naturalist, who seemed to know where to find any one of his 70,000 treasures, drew forth a drawer in which rested a pinkish moth with tails to his hind wings that reached nearly across the large case. It came from Sierra Leone, Africa, is very rare, and the specimen on which the visitor gazed is the only example in the Western Hemisphere. It cost the collector $107. Others that cost $50 each are numerous.

Then Mr. Strecker exhibited a drawer containing a long-winged, yellow butterfly from Equatorial Africa. "There are," he said, "only a dozen specimens in existence. I have three of them." In the course of the conversation it developed that great collectors know the number of specimens of every important or rare butterfly, and can tell you where each is owned. Away up toward the North Pole there were found on the second Ross expedition some hardy butterflies, a dozen specimens of which were secured. Mr. Strecker knew in what collections these are. He was aware that the British Museum has two, Jules Lederer of Vienna one, and so on. When he read that Lederer's collection was to be sold, he sent off post-haste to his agent in Europe, instructing him to buy it. The purchase was made, and the beloved butterfly now rests in Mr. Strecker's collection.

"Yes, we find butterflies everywhere," said the collector, "except perhaps at the Antarctic circle." So saying he produced a case of delicate-looking small white butterflies, whose wings were flecked with pink spots. They had come from mountain regions, some from the Swiss and German Alps, others from the Himalayas, 15,000 feet above sea level, and more from the Rocky Mountains. Some specimens had come from regions where the natives never capture butterflies. The only foreigners there are Jesuit missionaries, and collectors have had to depend upon them to gather the rare varieties, like those from Tatsienlou. On the other hand, other specimens come from regions where the lower order of natives gather them with great assiduity, although not from any devotion to science. Mr. Strecker showed a big one, with a body as large as an ordinary jackknife, and great gray wings. It came from Australia, where the natives eat it.

In a box devoted to insects was what looked like a withered beech leaf, but it wasn't. It was a grasshopper. A case of rare butterflies contained apparently another fallen leaf. It was a dead leaf butterfly from China. When it flies its extended wings of grayish blue make it appear a very handsome butterfly, but the lower surface of its wings is a dull brown, and when it closes them and lights on a limb it cannot readily be distinguished from a brown leaf.

"Here's a very timely butterfly," said the naturalist. It

looked like black velvet with shining green bands. The under side of the wings were a silvery white, and on each hind wing was a black marking forming a perfect "88."

Then there was a buff-colored moth with the figure of an anchor stamped on its back, and another moth which successfully passes itself off for a bee among all but insects and keen-eyed naturalists. He seems so anxious to pose as a bee that, though a moth, he flies in the daytime. A near relative of this masquerader is a moth that has assumed the disguise of a humming bird. The collector showed one light-complexioned moth from China, that is necessarily very abstemious, because he has no mouth. He manages to live awhile without eating, but it is hardly to be supposed that he has as good a time as the big-bodied black moth with a long bill which is curved up like a watch spring. When this moth reaches a flower to his taste he darts the long bill down in the depths of the blossom and sucks the nectar.

As a rule the male members of the moth and butterfly family put on all the style. This was observable in Mr. Strecker's collection, where the males were gorgeous in color and the females very plainly attired. The most meek and homely of all the females was a Mrs. Oiketicus. The male looks like a well-to-do fly, but the female is not a fly. She has no wings and no legs. She never goes out of the sack-like structure in which she was born. She never tastes food or sees the light, and the chances for domestic disturbance in their family are lowered by the fact that she and her partner never see each other.

The butterfly man handled one case with extra care. In it were specimens of a very ordinary looking species called Lycaena Xerxes, and hailing from California. The breed is now extinct. There was once a family of butterflies in Huntingdonshire, England, fire-colored fellows, but they too had their day and have been extinct since 1840. Of course Mr. Strecker has specimens of them. The loss of two races of butterflies has been more than amply made up by the discoveries that men like Mr. Strecker are continually making of new ones. Sometimes two naturalists will discover a new specimen at about the same time. Each will give it some unpronounceable name, and upon finding

that they are rivals for priority of discovery, the collectors will devote as much correspondence to settling the dispute, as it would take to arrange a treaty of peace between nations. Sometimes a new variety is named after a person, but the plan does not admit of such fearful and wonderful orthographic combinations as the collector loves, and it is not popular. Mr. Strecker has named several new discoveries, but only one of them after a man, who was T. Glover of the Agricultural Department.

"Now, I suppose you would like to see some of the pretty fellows," said the naturalist, with the kindly but almost pitying tone that an expert employs in humoring a novice. He drew forth a case full of the most gorgeous specimens that nature ever turned out. There were some from Brazil which look like changeable silk. Held in one light they were green, and in another a brilliant blue. Another case contained the beautiful silver butterflies from Central Chili, and another brown velvet ones from Ashantee. The golden Croesus from Halmeheira made a fine showing.

"I suppose you know," said the natural historian, "that the color of a butterfly's wings is made by a series of minute scales overlapping each other, and that the wings proper are colorless as glass. And, by the way, did you ever see a butterfly's wings grow? I have watched them emerge from the chrysalis. Their wings are little affairs, all out of proportion to their bodies; but they have every marking that is to appear on the enlarged wing. Suddenly those little wings begin to grow, and you can see them expand."

Mr. Strecker next exhibited his largest specimen, an owl moth from Brazil, which measures a foot across its wings, and then, moving more rapidly among his treasures, for it was growing late, he showed a specimen which is half one sex and half another, and still another variety which sport the needless luxury of an extra wing.

It sometimes happens that one of the same brood of butterflies will differ from all the rest. Among the odd specimens in the collection is a swallow-tail butterfly whose right wings and the right side of the body was yellow, the color of the male; and the left half of the body and left wings black, the color of the

female. It is when the male of one species that may be a deep blue falls in love with the female of another that may be copper-colored, that some butterflies of startling and often beautiful colors are born. The underside of the wings of the common painted lady butterfly are sometimes white. Mr. Strecker knows of but five specimens, and he told how he got one of them. He lighted on a foreign book in Philadelphia containing a plate of the variety, and was made despondent with the reflection that some one had succeeded in getting the treasure and that he was out in the cold. He walked over to the house of a friend who is a collector, and who remarked that some one had caught near the city a pale butterfly. Mr. Strecker saw it and was deeply agitated. It was one of the rare species of pale painted lady butterflies, exactly like that foreign one whose picture he had seen. Of course he got it and went home happy.

"Do we have any butterflies in winter?" asked the visitor.

The naturalist smiled and said, "Yes—under logs and stones. Sometimes a hardy fellow, ambitious to live, crawls under some object and hibernates. He comes out in the spring, makes a desperate effort to be gay, but soon flutters to the ground and dies."

The harvest moon, hanging over Neversink mountain in front of the naturalist's house, the lights in the valley and to the right, leading in double file down to the city, made a pretty picture as Mr. Strecker stepped to the door to bid his visitor good-bye. It had been a great visit. It is probable that his collection, which has no superior in the world, will, when he is done with his beloved labors, go into the possession of the Government, but there is hardly money enough in the nation to purchase it till he gets through with it.—New York Sun.